

How to Beat the Devil: Dealing with Chemical Dependency in our Family

by Greg and Riga Iverson

Rita: I am grateful to be here to learn. I thank you for letting me share a few thoughts about our experience. Then Greg, who is the public speaker in the family, will share after that. The whole disease of chemical dependency has been new to me. I had not had any personal experience with it whatsoever. Accordingly, I went through the various stages of grief, shock, denial, anger, depression and acceptance, but not necessarily in that order. I took Brad's use personally. I wondered what had I done or not done as a parent. I was devastated. I wanted to love Brad unconditionally, but I felt deeply hurt and betrayed. I felt judgmental toward him.

I knew that some of Brad's treatable problems with learning difficulties and depression had contributed to his drug use. I also knew that chemical dependency is a disease but it manifests itself in many anti-social, illegal, and I am convinced, immoral ways that compound the problem so it can be very embarrassing to discuss. But, we got help. We read books, attended meetings, talked to friends, saw counselors, went to family therapy sessions and prayed. I have tried and continue to try to turn Brad over to God to let Him handle it.

I try to take one day at a time and have used various techniques in order to cope. It is still a daily struggle to let go and let God. I have grown in this experience though. I find myself really listening to people more and having a greater sensitivity toward others. I am learning no longer to expect or to need life to be perfect or like a fairy tale.

Obviously, we would never in a thousand years anticipated or wanted to go through this particular kind of experience. It has been and to a lesser degree continues to be the most traumatic experience I have ever faced. But again the events of the past couple of years have tested my faith and my patience and have brought me closer to God and deepened my faith. God has made it possible for me to get where I am today. I am convinced that He will make it possible for me to get through whatever happens in the future. Greg will now share some of the details of our story and how we have tried to understand them from a Christian perspective.

Greg: One of the net results of my being in the ministry for over twenty-six years now is that I tend to look for the deeper theological or spiritual meanings in almost everything. I can't help it. It comes naturally, almost reflexively. I don't know, maybe it's even an occupational hazard. Chalk it up to a seminary education, maybe more significantly to twenty-six years in the parish ministry, perhaps more significantly yet to just experiencing the ups and downs and ins and outs of life. Whatever the reason or reasons, it seems pretty clear to me that the things that really matter rarely just happen. Life has meaning, theological meaning.

Not everything that happens demands theological explanation, of course. Things like my team winning a big game or overcooking the evening meal or running out of gas on the freeway probably have causes apart from God. Not that God isn't involved in the details of life. It's just that He has given us considerable latitude – freewill, most theologians would call it – over much of our lives. Some things happen because we planned them that way, or because we didn't plan at all, or because we planned poorly.

But, other things, some of life's major events, seem to call for a theological explanation – or at least an attempt at theological or spiritual understandings. Matters of life and death, human suffering and otherwise mysterious or miraculous events need a deeper theological exploration. When some event happens that has an impact upon my life and my family's life for this time and for some time to come, I seek to understand that event in theological context. What follows is my attempt to share some sort of theological perspective on something that profoundly changed my family and me as we became aware of it a couple of years ago.

The Slings and Arrows of Misfortune

Life seemed pretty normal for us until the spring of 2000. Rita and I were in our twenty-sixth year of marriage. We had two children: Emily, twenty-two years old, graduating from college, and Brad, sixteen years old, a sophomore in high school. Emily had gone away to college and so there were now just three persons in our household. To be sure, we had faced some of life's difficulties. Our first child was stillborn. My parents divorced after thirty-five years of marriage. My father then died in 1996. My job as a pastor moved us from place to place which stressed our family from time to time. The demands of ministry had occasionally made life less than completely comfortable for us. Besides that, Rita's work as a registered nurse specializing in oncology, seemingly always a matter of life and death, has not been easy. Our remaining three parents were aging and dealing with various sicknesses including cancer. But, on balance, there was nothing terribly out of the ordinary in our lives. We handled life like most people handle life. The celebrations and pains came in roughly equal numbers. Our faith in God gave us strength for the present and hope for the future. In other words, life seemed pretty normal. Our son Brad, though, seemed to be going through a difficult adolescence for some reason, more difficult than that of our daughter. His grades started to drop and continued to drop fairly steadily. And, little by little, he quit almost all extracurricular activities. He seemed increasingly argumentative. We wondered whether our last move, just before his seventh grade year, was more difficult on him than on the rest of us. We thought that being the only child at home was making things difficult for him. We had him checked for learning disorders. We didn't have any definitive answers, just a lot of concern.

We had some early suspicions of drug use. Knowing what we know now, we should have acted upon those suspicions and had a chemical dependency evaluation done immediately. But Brad denied any use of drugs and we didn't find any evidence in his room. Maybe, in retrospect, we should have searched his room more often or more thoroughly. He said that he had some friends that smoked and that's why he smelled like smoke himself. He seemed to have answers for our questions and we felt that we had to take him at his word. We trusted him, sort of.

But then things got worse, much worse. Almost weekly, things seemed to deteriorate. There were almost daily calls from his school letting us know that he was tardy for at least one class. There were days when he didn't even attend school. He left home on time and arrived home on time but we found out that he hadn't entered the school building at all. Then, one night, the night before our daughter Emily graduated from college, we were called by the police to come and pick up our son who had been stopped for underage consumption. He was sentenced to a little community service, which we had hoped would be a "wake up call" for him. And he had to pay his own money to attend a lecture on drug use with other kids and their parents. But that didn't turn out to be much of a wake-up call. If things were changing, they were changing only for the worse. His grades bottomed out, literally, and he set school records, again, almost literally, in accumulating tardies and trancies.

Finally, acting on a tip we received from a school counselor, we took Brad in for a chemical dependency evaluation. She didn't tell us what he and she had talked about; she couldn't, of course. She indicated that it would be good if we had him checked out. Well, he tested positive. We acted on the advice that we had received and put him through three weeks of outpatient chemical dependency treatment. Of course, we "took the cure" along with him. The last week of that program was an intensive family-therapy week. It was the most exhausting week that we have ever experienced. The emotional energy it required was more than we could ever have imagined. That was the week that we found out that Brad had not used just a little "weed" now and then, the word he used for marijuana, but that he had used a lot of "weed" and also had tried just about everything else. We were shocked by the extent of our son's drug usage, but he assured us that that was all in the past. We completed the program, thinking that we had "graduated" and that, with a little follow-up now and then, things would be just fine. Well, they weren't.

In the meantime, Brad had been asking for a car for a long time. He worked a little bit but didn't keep his jobs for very long and didn't save much money at all. He always said, of course, that he would do better in getting to school on time and getting back and forth to work and keeping a job if he just had his own transportation. You've heard that story. His behavior around home and his record at school were hardly worth rewarding. But, like his sister before him, he eventually wore us down. We got tired of saying "no" and eventually and reluctantly and, in retrospect, mistakenly, said "yes." So, out of money that we had saved for his college education, money he promised that he would pay back, we bought him a car a week or so before his seventeenth birthday.

That car lasted about a month before he totaled it. He had just picked up his paycheck at his latest place of work and reached down to pick it up off the floor on the passenger side of the car. He rear-ended a car waiting to make a left turn.

Everybody makes a mistake now and then, even though Brad's mistakes have always come with large price tags and long-term consequences. So, after another month or so, with the insurance settlement and a few more bucks from his college account, we bought Brad – I hate to say it – his second car. He had that one about another month or so before he ran into a row of the most firmly planted mailboxes in human history. The mailbox posts were virtually undamaged but the car's front end had caved in badly and the frame was bent. There was no way that we could make another insurance claim so soon, so we paid cash, again out of his college account, about \$5,000, to fix a \$7,000 car. Before too long, he smashed that car once more for a total of three accidents in about four months. He also had two or three speeding tickets within that same period of time.

Our relationship with him around the house only got worse. Rita, to be perfectly honest, did better than I did at keeping communication with him open. Psychologists probably have all kinds of reasons why men frequently have a harder time with their sons than women do – and, conversely, why women frequently have a harder time with their daughters than men do. But, whatever the reasons, I had a hard time reading the books that Rita was reading that *explained* our situation. I just wanted things to get better and was frustrated because they weren't heading in that direction.

Brad lied to us again and again and again. We didn't realize at the time that chemically dependent persons are liars, good liars, great liars, world-class liars, of necessity. He would tell us that he was in school when he hadn't been, that he did his homework when he hadn't, that he was staying overnight with a friend we knew when he wasn't, that he wasn't using drugs when he was.

Finally, we took Brad in for another chemical dependency evaluation. He tested positive again. It seems that he thought that he could beat the odds and "handle" his drug use by just being more careful and more moderate. Well, of course, he couldn't. Care and moderation are meaningless concepts for chemically dependent and addicted people. Anyway, we put him through chemical dependency treatment one more time, this time in an in-patient program. First, he spent a week in a lock-up facility where he sobered up. Then, over the next two weeks, he lived in a residential treatment facility.

Following the completion of that program, with a couple of false starts, he was admitted to Sobriety High, a small sober high school not far from where we live. He's been there since this past September and, as far as we know, he has been sober for the past seven months. He goes to AA meetings somewhat regularly and, in his school, gets daily group times with all of the students who are working together on their sobriety.

The story may not be over. In fact, it probably isn't. We just hope and pray that the most traumatic parts of it are. We know that, as "the program" teaches, all you can do is to take things "one day at a time." He's still a teenager, eighteen years old last month. That means that, even

without using drugs, he still has all kinds of ways of driving us crazy. But he's sober now, at least he seems to be, and that's the big thing.

Who's Responsible? The Existence of the Devil

One of my favorite episodes of M*A*S*H is when Hawkeye Pierce, the irreverent but exceedingly capable surgeon, finally "has it up to here" with the Korean War and decides to have Radar, the company clerk, send a telegram to President Harry Truman. It's a short telegram. "Dear Harry," it says. "Who's responsible?"

Well, I've been trying to figure that out in my own life and in my family's life for the past couple of years. Just who's responsible? Not just for this event and that event, for the little things that make up our lives, but for everything, for the "big picture." You know, like a lot of people, back when it was a "hot" book, I read Rabbi Harold Kushner's *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. That never explained very well to me why relatively good people, and like most people, I've always considered myself to be a *relatively* good person, why we or anyone like us should ever have to suffer. I mean, I couldn't buy everything that Kushner was trying to "sell." For one thing, he's a Jew and I'm a Christian; we approach religious faith differently. He seems to suggest that there are some things that a good God just can't, or, at the very least, won't do. His argument is that if God is good and, by definition, God *must* be good, then some bad things happen because God just has no control or chooses not to have control over those things. God, Kushner says, wouldn't be good if he could exercise control over some of the bad things in life but then chose not to do so. Like I say, I can't buy that. I remember from my seminary days that God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent: all-powerful, all-knowing and everywhere present. I can't believe that God is responsible for what happened to me and my family or that it just happened. So, like Hawkeye, I've been trying to figure out just who's responsible.

Interestingly enough, twenty-six years of experience in the ministry and fifty-one years of age, much more than my formal theological education, have finally taught me what others have known for a long time: that there is a real personification of evil in the world who has traditionally been called the devil or Satan. I'm a slow learner, apparently. My mainline seminary education didn't spend a lot of time on the existence and the reality of evil. However, much of what I have learned about life and the influences of evil has taught me that someone is in charge of evil in this world. Now, please don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that there is a devil behind every bush. Not everything can be blamed on the devil. Sometimes, at least, Pogo was right. "We have met the enemy and he is us." We need to take responsibility for our own actions and the mistakes and sins that we commit. We have been created with a free will, and our willful misuse of that freedom sometimes brings about a just punishment. It does no good to be irrationally fearful or unreasonably blameful. The devil is not under each and every rock.

However, the devil may be behind more bushes than we think! We cannot explain away every destructive act as mere deviant behavior. We cannot dismiss hate and hate crimes as diversity. True, we need to take responsibility for the evil things that we do. Nonetheless, there are some evil things that happen because they are a part of a master plan by a master evildoer. In other words, I have to believe that evil is a reality in this world, both in its larger worldwide manifestations and in its much smaller and more personal and yet, still exceedingly hurtful manifestations, like what has happened to my family and me over the past couple of years. When I was about twelve or fourteen years old, I went on a fishing trip to Canada with my father and some of his friends and their sons. It was a great trip. We were gone for about a week and we caught lots of fish. While the boys drank all the soft drinks they could consume over the course of a week without their mothers around, the men drank beer and, occasionally something stronger. I don't recall that any of the dads drank way too much or that they had so much to drink that they became sick or belligerent or falling-down drunk. They were just behaving like a lot of men felt that they could behave in front of their sons without their wives around: a little rowdy but not too rowdy. However, I remember one conversation when my father's old high school

classmate Wayne took another swig of beer and said to the men and the boys sitting around the campfire, "You know, if there ever was a devil, he lived in a bottle." Everybody laughed at that. What I remembered for decades as a joke was visited upon me as a reality a couple of years ago. Although the devil is alive and well in many different circumstances, certainly one of the places where he lives, I am convinced, is in the bottles and the joints and the capsules and the syringes that we sometimes use to numb our pain or somehow to relax us or to enhance our lives. For me, it's no longer a joke. It's no longer something to be mocked. The devil does live in a bottle, among other places, where he waits for us and lures us into destruction. I don't know what your experience with chemical dependency may be, but I simply have no other way to explain the kind of havoc and destruction visited upon me and my family through my son's use of chemicals. There is simply no question in my mind when it comes to who's responsible. When it comes to chemical dependency, the devil is responsible.

I need to say that. I need to admit that. I need to identify the enemy. You can't fight an enemy until you know who that enemy is. For me, it's perfectly obvious that not only Rita and I, but also Brad, more than either of us, have all been fighting the devil.

Why Me, Lord?

An Attack on Pastors and Congregations

The question of responsibility leads to yet another question: Why me, Lord? So the devil is behind all kinds of destruction on global levels and on personal levels. Why me? Why has this particular form of evil, chemical dependency, been visited upon me and my family instead of someone else and his or her family? Is it a purely random, an accidental kind of thing like contracting some dread disease over which we have no control? Is it a kind of "out of the blue" experience that no one had any way of foretelling? Or, is it in some way according to some plan perhaps not entirely understood by us, an intentional bit of evil specifically designed for a specific person at a specific time and in a specific way?

Again, I have to believe that evil is not random or accidental but that it does indeed happen for some reason. The devil wants it to happen in exactly the way it happens to exactly the person or persons it happens.

I've generally considered myself to be a reasonably competent and effective minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, not the most competent or the most effective and certainly not the best, but reasonably competent and effective. I'm not the only one who has ever done anything of consequence or of value in the churches that I have served, of course; but let's face it: the pastor of a church is a key player in the life of almost any congregation. In all objectivity, I believe that I have been relatively good at what I have been called to do.

So, most likely, are you. You have been called by God to serve the people of God to the best of your human ability, fallible though you may be, and as empowered by God as you can allow yourselves to be. Effective pastors are what the church, individual churches of many different theological persuasions and denominational stripes, and the greater Church, the universal Church in the world, need. Churches without pastors generally tread water at best or flounder at worst.

Churches with *pastors* who themselves tread water or who flounder about in their ministry can do even worse than churches without pastors. Churches with pastors who are ineffective are sometimes in worse shape than churches without any kind of leadership at all. People "led," so to speak, by ineffective leaders are in greater danger than those who have no leader at all. I believe that. Do you believe that? A part of our calling is not just to serve God but also to serve Him as effectively, with His help, as we possibly can.

Friends, if that's true, then it stands to reason that the devil will attack competent and effective spiritual leaders whenever and wherever he can. He will find a weak spot and go after it. Now, for some spiritual leaders, for some pastors, it may be their ego, their pride. For others, it may be a temptation toward complacency. For others, it may be pornography or marital infidelity. For

others, it may be financial difficulty or indebtedness. For others, it may be sowing the seeds of doubt about their calling. For different pastors, it's different things. All of us have felt an attack by Satan in our lives. The devil attacks effectiveness and competency in order to leave God's people as leaderless as possible. He doesn't bother to waste his time attacking those who are already ineffective and incompetent. Like us, he picks his battles. He fights us where it will make a difference. He chooses to attack competent and effective spiritual leaders whenever and wherever he can.

For some reason, through the chemical dependency of my son, he chose to attack my family, my ministry, and me. In all honesty, it was potentially a lethal attack. He knew that my wife and I would be embarrassed by our son's behavior. He knew that some people would have doubts about my ability to be a leader of a congregation when it appeared that I couldn't be a leader in my own family. He knew that some people might even discover what Paul says in I Timothy 3:4-5, that a spiritual leader "must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect." In other words, if anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church? The devil knew that people would gossip about my parenting abilities or about my being preoccupied too much with family matters to be a good pastor, or about my "worthiness" to teach them or their children. I have always taken seriously the words that were said to me when I was ordained. "Go and take thou authority to preach the Gospel." I think that the devil knew that the place to attack and wound me was through my family, which would seem to undermine that authority. The method, the instrument, the tool that he chose was the chemical dependency of our son.

We Methodists generally aren't taught much about spiritual warfare. I didn't learn about spiritual warfare in seminary. I learned about it in the heat of battle. It wasn't something that came to me out of a book, but rather out of my personal experience. The devil is strong, much stronger than I am in my own strength. Apart from God, I have no strength to stand against the evil that I have faced. I am powerless as a human being to stand against him whose plan it is to destroy everyone and who just may choose to destroy some Christians by causing their leaders to become distracted, ineffectual and incompetent. The devil chose this one way to destroy my family and me and, through that personal destruction, to destroy my ministry. I had only one hope.

Taking Care of Business

Looking back, it seems like the answer was so simple. But at the time, it was anything but simple. It was a mass destruction that resulted in confusion, chaos, despair, fear and hopelessness. I have found that I have always been pretty good at helping people discover what's wrong with their lives and at writing out prescriptions on what they could take that could fix their lives. Somehow, I was spiritually blinded about the things messed up in my own life and what I could do and needed to do to remedy those issues. Part of the problem with being in a state of hopelessness is that you don't see what you can do to stop being hopeless. Telling someone who is confused to stop being confused is like telling someone to pick himself up by his own bootstraps. Rarely do you ever get very high above the ground doing that. No, you need strength and a power *outside* yourself to exert a force upon you to lift you up. That strength to us is God. It seems so simple. When going through that "dark night of the soul," the answer is anything but simple.

I would like to tell you that I just turned my life over to God once again and immediately He healed my family and me of all that we were facing. I'd like to be able to tell you my story as some sort of normative experience that you could take and apply to your life. I wish I had a miraculous cure for the chemical dependency of your son or your daughter. There's nothing I'd like more than to be able to stand here and to share a magic and miraculous cure that we experienced and which would surely work for you in the same way.

The programs that deal with chemical dependency – programs like AA, Al-Anon, NA (Narcotics Anonymous), FA (Families Anonymous) and Alateen, etc. – are right when they say the road to wellness happens just "one day at a time." That's why no one talks about being fully recovered or

cured from chemical dependency. It's also why no family members or other loved ones talk about having recovered from the illness that comes from the chemical usage of another family member. We're all *recovering* in this experience. We're all in the process of getting better. I want to tell you a few things that I have found to be helpful in my own personal and professional life regarding the chemical dependency of our son.

First, after the initial shock and embarrassment and the accompanying confusion, chaos, despair, fear and hopelessness, I decided to take the advice that I had given to so many others and not to "go it alone" anymore. There are lots of reasons for pastors and other spiritual leaders to want to go it alone, of course, some of which I already mentioned. It's hard to share things like this with your congregation. It's hard to think that people are going to talk about you when you turn your back. However, the truth is they're *already* talking about you whenever you leave the room. A friend says, "Remember, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean that people *aren't* against you." People are going to talk about their spiritual leaders. Accordingly, I found it preferable to tell them, at least some of them, what was going on in my life rather than have them find out from someone who might have had a somewhat less than pure motivation. I told my personnel committee, in my denomination called the "Staff-Parish Relations Committee," about my son's chemical dependency, about our family's struggle with it, and about the personal hurt it was causing us. I wanted to take the matter to them instead of running the risk of having one or more of them bring the matter to me. I also chose to talk with one or two close friends in the congregation about what we were facing. I don't know about you, but I think that one of the reasons so many pastors say that we have so few friends in the congregations that we serve is that we take so few of them into our confidence in times when they could support us. I needed friends and I found them.

On the other hand, I purposely did not speak *publicly* about what was happening in our family nor with just anyone. I had a public ministry to conduct and I did not want to allow the devil to derail that agenda. A lot of information in the right hands can be exceedingly helpful. A little information in the wrong hands can be unbelievably hurtful.

Rita and I also sought help from others who had faced similar circumstances. We went to Al-Anon and read their literature as a part of our daily devotional time. Rita has been much better and much more faithful in that exercise than I have been, but we approach our devotional lives in different ways – she more formally, me less formally. Nevertheless, we have both found help in being in groups of people who have "been there." We have attended meetings at Brad's schools. One advantage of his being kicked out of so many schools before finally landing at his present sober school is that we have lots of contacts with teachers and support staff in lots of locations. Every time somebody decides to hold a meeting about kids and chemical dependency, we put it on our calendar. We're there. We admit it. We can't face this alone. We need all the help we can get.

Yet, there are unique dimensions to the lives that pastors lead. I am not one to suggest that pastors or other spiritual leaders have it any more difficult when it comes to dealing with chemical dependency in their families, particularly when a son or daughter is involved, than anyone else would have. How do you measure the magnitude of pain? Extreme hurt is extreme hurt, no matter who you are. Hell is hell. A carpenter, or a teacher, or a doctor would surely hurt as much as any pastor dealing with chemical dependency in his or her family. However, our lives *are* different than the lives that others lead. Therefore, we need to share with people who have and who are experiencing this kind of hurt from the same perspective. That's why we're here today and tomorrow, not so much to speak to you, although we're honored to do that, but because we need to be with others who are going through the same thing. That's why Rita and I flew to Phoenix last year for our first *You're Not Alone* conference and listened to others who had experienced many of the same things that we were experiencing.

In short, the way that we have chosen to take care of the business of getting healthy has been to make as many connections as possible with others and, through them, with God.

Epilogue

Some people have struggled with chemical dependency in their families for decades and even lifetimes. It would be presumptuous for either of us to suggest that we are experts and have this thing “licked” because of our experience of just a couple of years. We hope that it’s over. We pray that it will be over. Yet, we know that it will never be completely over and that life will continue to be a struggle in this or some other ways until the day we die. We stand here before you today not with absolute answers that will work in all situations but only with an experience to share. We have found strength in the ability to share with others and encourage you to do the same.

Brad has been sober for about seven months now. We celebrate that. But we live with the reality that it could end at any time, even tonight while we are here, and that we may need to start the process all over again. What we have learned through the experience of the past couple of years, however, is that God will be with us as we “work to beat the devil.”